

The trump card of university museums: academics from freshmen to emeriti

Few museums can hope to be surrounded by a more extensive and versatile network of experts than university museums. Very often university museums establish contacts with the academic community already when building up their collections. Interaction with members of the academic community from porters to professors is essential for the salvaging of materials and recording of related data.

The historical material of Helsinki University Museum has mostly been gathered from various University departments, often salvaged in connection with relocations or renovations. In such cases, a department porter, an administrative officer or a professor has, in the midst of all other haste, contacted the museum about saving old valuable research equipment, instruments or furniture and redeploying them to the museum. The first contacts with the people who know the objects and have perhaps even used them are often established in such conditions. In the past, departments could be rather jealous about the historical objects in their possession, but I have noticed that today, their attitude about handing over historical material to the museum has changed. There are two reasons for this: as departments presently have to pay rent for each and every square metre in their use, their willingness to let go of space-consuming, out-dated instruments and equipment has increased. Furthermore, their awareness of the mission of the museum has grown: the departments understand that the museum assumes responsibility for the preservation of historical heritage for future generations and they now take pride in seeing that their objects have found a place in the museum's display cases. The departments are also ready to admit that the preservation of their historical objects has greatly depended on the personal interest of the head of the department in the history of his or her field.

In order to establish cooperation, university museums must actively create contacts with the faculties and departments of their universities. The University of Helsinki has 11 faculties and 64 departments, so there is abundant expertise available from a myriad of fields for the organising of exhibitions. Even though it is true that the museum may be regarded as a "parasite" from the point of view of the University's primary mission of teaching and research, personal contacts may greatly alleviate this

prejudice. Both current holders of professorships and recently retired professors are often willing to participate in the activities of the museum and thus bring forth their expertise and research results. According to my experience, professors are eager, within the limits of their other duties, to contribute to the designing of an exhibition or to act as lecturers for an exhibition lecture series, either pro bono or for a small fee.

At Helsinki University Museum, current professors and lecturers participated in the designing of the permanent exhibition and they wrote, for the most part, the articles on the history of the various fields of scholarship for the museum guidebook. Retired professors contributed to the charting of the objects, investigation of their use and history, and to the choice of objects to be put on display.

Our museum has particularly good experiences of collaboration in the creation and mounting of special exhibitions. As we all know, putting up special exhibitions requires great effort from small museums in the form of resources and countless working hours. Helsinki University Museum was opened to the public in November 2003, and, since then, two special exhibitions have been put up every year, so far amounting to a total of six. The first two exhibitions were at the responsibility of students: the exhibition *Student nations 1643-2003* was a joint effort of all the 15 student associations referred to 'nations' at the University of Helsinki, and the exhibition *Students in search of a nation*, focusing on the collection of ethnographic material by Finnish students in the provinces in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was a study project carried out by students of museology. The exhibition *In the footsteps of the bear, at the ice holes of the Amur river*, highlighting shamanism and the significance of the bear in the mythology of the Northern peoples, was designed and mounted by a professor of comparative religion together with his students from the Faculties of Theology and Arts, for at the University of Helsinki, comparative religion is a joint discipline of these two faculties. This exhibition fulfilled one important criterion that the museum has set for its special exhibitions: they must display those fields of teaching and research at the University which are not adequately featured in the permanent exhibition. In all the exhibitions mentioned above, our partners designed and mounted the exhibitions independently.

An exhibition was held to commemorate the bicentennial of Magnus von Wright, a prominent Finnish artist, drawing master at the University's Art Room, taxidermist at the Zoological Museum and a nature researcher. The specialists behind this exhibition consisted of an emeritus professor of the history of science and learning and three other professors in the natural sciences, who also designed the exhibition.

The exhibition on academics as political and societal leaders (many Finnish presidents have had an academic background), entitled *From professor to president, from prime minister to chancellor*, was based on the expertise of one active and one retired professor of history. These professors also acted as the lecturers for the lecture series arranged in connection with the exhibition.

Currently our museum features the exhibition *From myths to understanding – a journey through the history of medicine*, which was jointly designed by three professors of medicine.

Whereas students bring enthusiasm and new ideas to the designing of exhibitions, the emeritus professors bring their vast expertise. So it is of great benefit that students and professors alike are willing to sacrifice their time and effort to the University Museum. One aspect of great significance is that these esteemed professors have good connections to sources of funding: with their help, we have obtained small grants from foundations and funds for the mounting of exhibitions. On the basis of these experiences I am willing to claim that finding enthusiastic volunteers to act as a background force is easier for university museums than for other museums.

The mission of a university museum at a university

Today, universities are conceived as having three core duties: teaching, research and societal interaction. These duties are also written into the Strategic Plan of the University of Helsinki. The Finnish Universities Act provides the universities with the following edifying mission: “to promote independent research and scientific and artistic education, to provide higher education based on research, and to educate students to serve their country and humanity. In carrying out their mission, the universities shall interact with the surrounding society and promote the societal

impact of research findings and artistic activities.“ The third mission of universities also involves museums, which display the history of scholarship, and illustrate research work and its results to the public. By creating good connections with leading specialists in their fields, university museums will obtain a valuable and sympathetic support network for their operations.